Episode Book

EPISODE #6406

Arab Parties and Coalition Math in the Knesset

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SYNOPSIS

Neither major bloc holds a Knesset majority without the 19 seats split between Ra'am and the Joint List. This primer unpacks the ideological and strategic gulf separating the two factions, from Hadash's socialist roots to Ra'am's pragmatic civic focus. It examines how Ra'am previously leveraged four seats to secure over fifty billion shekels without holding cabinet posts, and analyzes whether a new government could ever survive a coalition deal bound by demands spanning local crime, zoning, and regional security.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Nineteen seats, and the two blocs that need them both spent the campaign promising not to take the call.



Corn

Hannah sent us this one, and it's the coalition arithmetic after the twenty-seventh. Netanyahu's side has fifty-three, Eisenkot's has forty-eight, the Arab parties have nineteen, and sixty-one is the number. Hannah says she has only broad impressions of Ra'am and the Joint List, so she wants the real primer first: what they stand for, how they differ, and whether "communist" is a fair label. Then the harder part. What would joining a coalition actually give them that the same seats in opposition don't, can a government run on a limited shared program, and how do you make security decisions without handing a small partner a veto?



Herman

The place to begin is that "the Arab parties" is a phrase hiding four movements. Hadash is communist and socialist, and it's Arab-Jewish. Ta'al is Arab nationalist, Ahmad Tibi's vehicle. Balad is secular Arab nationalist, "a state of all its citizens," and to its critics far left. Ra'am is Islamist, led by Mansour Abbas. The Joint List is the first three, run together. Ra'am left that alliance in January of twenty twenty-one over ideology.



Corn

Four movements, two ballot lines. That's more diversity than most coalitions manage on purpose.



Herman

And the numbers are striking. Eleven seats for the Joint List, eight for Ra'am, almost eight hundred forty thousand votes between them. That's up sixty-four percent on twenty twenty-two, on turnout of seventy-seven point nine percent, the highest since nineteen ninety-nine.



Corn

So the arithmetic says one thing, and Eisenkot campaigned on the opposite.



Herman

Right, and that gap is the whole episode. Let's take them one tradition at a time, starting with Ra'am.



Corn

Go ahead. I'll nap through the Bedouin part, I've heard it.



Herman

You have not heard it. Ra'am was founded in nineteen ninety-six as the political wing of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, which is the faction that accepted Oslo and chose to enter parliamentary politics at all. The Northern Branch said no to that. In July of this year Ra'am formally separated from the movement. Its base is Bedouin and Sunni Muslim towns, and the standard description is "a conservative party with Islamist roots."



Corn

Conservative, so socially it's closer to a haredi party than to Hadash.



Herman

On religion and family, yes, that's a fair comparison. And on the economy it isn't a socialist party in any serious way. What it's organized around is delivery to Arab society: housing, planning, budgets, policing. In January it opened its list to Jewish candidates and later recruited Yoav Segalovitz, a former Yesh Atid MK and ex-head of the national serious-crime unit.



Corn

Which tells you what they think the voters are angry about.



Herman

Crime. Exactly the thing a former crime-unit chief is for.



Corn

An Islamist party's headline recruit is a retired detective. I'd have guessed an imam.



Herman

The Moshe Dayan Center has the cleanest frame for this. There's a national school and a civic-local school. The national school, the Joint List, ties normalization with the state to resolving the Palestinian question and to changing the state's character. The civic-local school, Ra'am, wants to improve Arab society's position without setting national or ideological preconditions.



Corn

So Ra'am isn't softer on nationalism. It just doesn't make it the entry fee.



Herman

That's the point, and people miss it. It's a different theory of how to get things done. Abbas's argument is that Arab citizens have waited seventy-plus years for the conflict to be solved first, and meanwhile the towns have no zoning and the murder rate climbs.



Corn

What does that look like on the ground? Zoning sounds abstract.



Herman

It's very concrete. If a town has no approved master plan, a family can't get a building permit, so they build anyway, and then the house is illegal from the day the roof goes on. It can be demolished, fined, or left without a grid connection. Multiply that across a generation and you get whole neighborhoods in permanent legal limbo. That's the daily reality Abbas points to when he says the conflict can't be the precondition.



Corn

And on Zionism itself? Hannah asked directly.



Herman

Ra'am doesn't call itself Zionist and it doesn't campaign to undo the state's character. It takes the state as it exists, including the Jewish character, as a fact to work within. Bennett's objection is worth noting here. He framed his opposition around the party's non-Zionist character, not its members' ethnicity.



Corn

Which is a distinction that sounds tidier on a stage than in a voting booth.



Herman

Probably. Now the Joint List. Its stated platform is end the occupation, a Palestinian state on the June nineteen sixty-seven lines with East Jerusalem as capital, negotiations with the PLO, a refugee solution under Resolution one ninety-four, and equal citizenship. That's explicit, and it's what I'd call maximalist on the Palestinian file.



Corn

And "communist"?



Herman

Accurate for Hadash, an oversimplification for the alliance. Two of the three factions, Ta'al and Balad, are nationalist, not Marxist. Hadash is the communist-rooted one, and historically it supplied the alliance's only Jewish MK, Dov Khenin.



Corn

So calling the Joint List communist is like calling a three-person carpool a trucking company.



Herman

Because one passenger drives a truck? Fine. Their unity is tactical. It's threshold survival. Alone, any of them is at risk of falling under the electoral threshold, and together they're safe.



Corn

So it's less a marriage than a shared umbrella.



Herman

A shared umbrella in a storm they didn't choose. The threshold was raised in twenty fourteen, and the joint list was the direct response. The first one in twenty fifteen won thirteen seats, which is why people still treat that as the high-water mark.



Corn

Who's actually leading it now? Abu Shehadeh pulled out, I remember that.



Herman

Yousef Jabareen, Hadash chairman, is first. Tibi is second. Balad's Sami Abu Shehadeh was third until he withdrew on the second of October, and Hadash's Faten Ghattas replaced him. The highest Balad name is now Bakhar Awawdeh, fourth.



Corn

So the nationalist wing gave up the number-three slot to the communists, in an alliance that's mostly nationalist.



Herman

Which is the sort of thing that stays quiet until the first vote that splits them.



Corn

Honestly, I'd have said economic policy is where they'd differ most. Socialists on one side, a religious conservative party on the other.



Herman

That's a reasonable guess but it's a bit off, and I'll tell you why. Both lists emphasize Arab-sector development, welfare and education spending. The Joint List frames it inside a broader equal-citizenship and anti-occupation platform, so Hadash's social-democratic instincts show through. Ra'am treats it as a transaction: here's our list of needs, here's what we'll vote for.



Corn

A shopping list versus a worldview.



Herman

Roughly. And on crime they're closer than anywhere else. Jabareen demands a funded and monitored plan, meaning money plus a way to check it was spent. Ra'am wants the same, and has the former detective to say so.



Corn

Monitored. In Israeli budgeting that word is carrying a lot of weight.



Herman

It always is. Now the tactical divide, which is where this becomes politics. Ra'am wants to participate in government. The Joint List offers conditional support from outside. Jabareen sets red lines over national issues, war and settlement budgets in particular. Tibi has ruled out joining a government but offered to help replace the Knesset speaker.



Corn

Which is a very specific kind of help. Not a government, just one chair.



Herman

A chair, yes, and I think it tells you a lot. Ra'am is also willing to work with anti-Netanyahu parties generally, which Hadash and Balad reject. On cooperation with Israeli institutions, Ra'am has already sat in a coalition and the Joint List never has.



Corn

Never? In seventy-eight years?



Herman

Never as a member. Ra'am in twenty twenty-one was the first independent Arab party in a government, and the first Arab party in a coalition since nineteen seventy-seven. That's the case we should walk through, because it answers Hannah's central question. That's the primer. What does coalition membership actually buy?



Corn

Let me guess before you start. Cabinet posts. Ministers, cars, a flag on the bonnet.



Herman

That's what most people assume, and the twenty twenty-one deal says otherwise. Ra'am joined the Bennett-Lapid coalition on the second of June, and it took no ministerial posts at all. And the agreement guaranteed over fifty-three billion shekels, around sixteen billion dollars, for infrastructure and crime reduction in Arab towns.



Corn

Zero ministers, fifty-three billion. I've seen ministers get less for more.



Herman

And it followed through. In October the cabinet approved a nine point four billion dollar plan covering Arab employment, health, housing, technology and infrastructure, with another billion for crime. It became law with the budget on the fourth of November. Bedouin villages were recognized and thousands of previously illegal homes got connected to the grid.



Corn

So what was the leverage? Seats are seats.



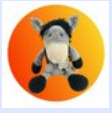
Herman

The leverage was that Bennett's coalition couldn't pass anything without them. Not the portfolios, the credible threat to walk. A party that can sink the budget doesn't need a title. Committee chairs matter too, since that's where legislation gets shaped, and budget lines, because that's where it gets paid for.



Corn

But a threat only works if the other side believes it. Why did Bennett believe it?



Herman

Because his majority was razor thin. Every single member was a potential veto, and Ra'am's four seats were the difference. When the margin is one vote, a small party's threat to leave is arithmetic, not theater.



Corn

Then what does the actual list of demands look like this time? I'd imagine it's longer than a coat.



Herman

Channel 14 reported the baseline. On posts, a ministerial portfolio for Segalovitz, a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Office, chairmanships of the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee, the National Security Committee and the Arab Society Affairs Committee, plus a deputy speaker.



Corn

National Security Committee. That one's going to land badly.



Herman

Yes, I'd flag that. On money, a five-year development plan for the Arab sector, about three billion shekels for violent crime, and about seven and a half billion to regularize Bedouin housing in the Negev. Recognition of unrecognized villages including Abda, Khashim Zanna and Rakhama, and freezing the Kamenitz Law on illegal building.



Corn

Hold on. So that's the domestic basket, and it's roughly the twenty twenty-one deal with a bigger number.



Herman

It is. And that part I think a government could live with. But the same reported list also includes binding timetables for IDF withdrawals from Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, bolstering the Palestinian Authority, renewing permanent-status negotiations, halting E1 construction, demolishing unauthorized West Bank farm outposts, and free movement for Palestinians in the West Bank.



Corn

That's not a limited shared program. That's a foreign policy.



Herman

Which is the tension. Hannah asked whether a government could handle divisive issues through agreed red lines while focusing on common ground. For the domestic basket, plausible. But the leaked demands are precisely the package Eisenkot's four principles were written to exclude. So I'm not sure the Arab parties are asking for the limited model at all.



Corn

Or it's an opening bid. Nobody writes their real number on page one.



Herman

Maybe. I can't tell you which of those is true, and I don't think anyone outside the rooms can.



Corn

Let me ask you something. If you were Abbas, would you really want the security demands on paper? They sink the deal that you personally want.



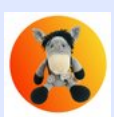
Herman

Interesting. I think Ra'am would drop them first. It's the civic-local school, remember. The Joint List is the one that can't, because its voters would treat that as selling out. Which is why I suspect the real shape isn't membership, it's the outside-support model.



Corn

Explain how that works without sixty-one.



Herman

Under Basic Law: The Government, a cabinet needs the Knesset's confidence, but abstentions don't count. A simple majority of votes cast is enough. So run it. Forty-eight from the Eisenkot bloc plus Ra'am's eight is fifty-six for. Fifty-three against. The Joint List's eleven abstain. Government confirmed, fifty-six to fifty-three, with a coalition of



Herman (continued)

forty-eight seats.



Corn

A government that rules on the strength of people sitting on their hands.



Herman

And it's harder to topple than it looks, because Israel uses constructive no-confidence. Opponents can't just vote it down. Sixty-one MKs have to agree on a replacement, including the prime minister, ministers and guidelines. So a minority government can lose votes and still stand.



Corn

Which means the Netanyahu bloc, with fifty-three, could vote against everything and still not get anywhere.



Herman

Unless they could assemble sixty-one for an alternative, and they can't without someone who isn't theirs. Tel Aviv University's Yael Shomer notes that about a third of governments in parliamentary systems worldwide are minority governments, and they're "not as unstable as one would envision."



Corn

Well, before we get into all of that, I think we have a phone call. It's Mum.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. It's time for Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

The word toast comes from the Latin torrere, which means to scorch or parch. So even the name is about burning, sweetheart. Nothing ever just warms up nicely, does it.

D

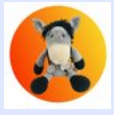
Dorothy

Anyway. I've got a load of washing on and I should go and hang it out before it sits there all afternoon.



Herman

Always a delight, Mum.



Herman

Where were we? The outside-support posture. Tomer Naor from the Movement for Quality Government described it nicely: "We don't even want to be part of your coalition, but we support you. We let you live."



Corn

That's a generous reading of a Knesset abstention. I'd call it a lease.



Herman

A lease with a renewal date, because there's a budget deadline. Confidence-and-supply agreements commit an outside party to back confidence and budget votes, and if no budget passes on time, the Knesset can dissolve.



Corn

So the veto isn't over security. It's over whether the lights stay on.



Herman

I'd say that's right. And it's what I find most interesting about the security question Hannah raised. I looked for a specific mechanism, some clause or security-cabinet carve-out or written veto limiter, and I can't point you to one that anyone has actually proposed. What exists is structural. Constructive no-confidence protects a government from being toppled over a security vote. The twenty twenty-one precedent is membership without portfolios. And the outside-support format means a party that abstains has no hand in operational decisions at all.



Corn

Then the honest design is the boring one. Keep them out of the room where the war cabinet meets, and pay them in budget lines.



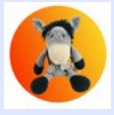
Herman

That's my guess too. Though I wonder, Corn, whether you think Ra'am would accept that? A party that wants a National Security Committee chair isn't a party that wants to sit outside the room.



Corn

I think they'd take the chair and call it a victory. Committees are where nobody's looking. If I were them, I'd want the Arab Society committee and Internal Affairs, and I'd let someone else have the glory.



Herman

Glory is not in their demand list, to be fair.



Corn

It never is. It's budget lines all the way down.



Herman

But a committee chair isn't nothing on security. A chair sets the agenda, calls the hearings, and decides who gets summoned to testify. That's soft power, and it's exactly why the demand reads as provocative to the other side even if the legal authority is limited.



Corn

So the fight is about the symbolism of the room, not what's decided in it.



Herman

Often, yes. Now the obstacles, because they're serious. Eisenkot's four conditions, issued on the thirty-first: recognize Israel as a Jewish, democratic, liberal and egalitarian state, commit to the Declaration of Independence's values, mandatory military, national or civilian service for all, and recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization and commit to destroying its military and governing power. In September he said he saw no Arab party meeting those.



Corn

Number three is going to be the hard one for Ra'am's base and the Joint List's. Number four for Balad, I'd guess.



Herman

For different reasons, yes. Ayman Odeh said in twenty fifteen about armed struggle, "I do not put red lines on the Arab Palestinian nation." That's the sort of sentence a Likud ad writer circles in red.



Corn

And Likud did say Eisenkot intends "to breach the trust of Israel's citizens and cooperate with parties that support terrorism."



Herman

And Netanyahu on X: "Cooperation with Mansour Abbas and Tibi is a disaster for Israel." Ben-Gvir told the haredi parties not to help the left form a government, calling it a historic mistake. On the other side, Liberman rejects supporting a minority government even temporarily, which removes a partner Eisenkot needs. Yair Golan supports bringing Ra'am in.



Corn

So the opposition bloc has its own veto players, and they're not Arab.



Herman

Which I think gets underreported. The arithmetic doesn't only fail on the Arab question. Ten days before the vote we each forecast this a different way, and the actual fifty-three, forty-eight, nineteen is the first real test of those forecasts.



Corn

Mine was structural, so I'm calling it a draw.



Herman

Your model had stability in it. This is a stalemate, though.



Corn

A stalemate is a negotiation being conducted at the correct speed. Everybody involved is just in a hurry.



Herman

You say that at every deadlock.



Corn

Because it keeps being true.



Herman

Here's what I wanted to ask you, though. If the government never forms, does the Arab vote still matter? Because I think it does, and that's the real answer to what seats buy.



Corn

You mean before any government exists.



Herman

Yes. A Netanyahu-opposing majority, with Arab votes, can elect a new Knesset speaker, pass a state commission of inquiry into the October seventh failures, and repeal parts of the judicial-overhaul legislation. That's power without coalition membership. And Eisenkot's own line fits: "In the State of Israel, it is the Knesset that expresses confidence in the government, not the other way around."



Corn

Then I'd say that's the safer route for him. Let the Arab MKs vote on a speaker and an inquiry, and never put their names on a coalition agreement.



Herman

And the Arab parties get something out of it too. A vote on an inquiry is a vote their own electorate can see and count. A line in a coalition agreement is something they have to wait years to see delivered.



Corn

Visible wins now, invisible wins later.



Herman

And then there's Iran. A renewed war could push Eisenkot into an emergency unity government with Netanyahu, like after October seventh, and the whole Arab-party question evaporates.



Corn

Which is a funny sort of answer. We worked out how to include them, and the solution is a crisis that makes it moot.



Herman

How long do you think a signed coalition promise takes to actually reach the town it's meant for, Corn?



Hilbert

Longer than they say. I put in a request this week to the registrar's office for the filing of one little party from the eighties, and I'm on my fourth visit. A man called Mr. Zelikovich runs the counter. He says the file exists and that it's "in transit," which is the part I don't like, because the building is one floor. I walked up to the second floor myself on the third visit and nobody there had heard of it.



Hilbert

Herman, you'd like him. He speaks the register you do. He told me the form I filled in was "not the form that corresponds."



Herman

That's a real phrase, and I have heard it said with great calm.



Hilbert

Three weeks to be told which form. Then they sent me a different one. Nobody there was rude about it. It's just that nothing ever left the counter.



Corn

That's what a budget line looks like after the signing.



Hilbert

Zelikovich says Thursday. He's said Thursday for nineteen days.



Herman

Nineteen days for one file in one building. A five-year development plan has a lot more floors than that.



Corn

And no one's checking the second floor.



Herman

Which is why the monitoring language in Jabareen's crime demand matters more than the headline number. Money gets approved in a day, and then someone has to watch where it goes.



Corn

If that's the lesson of twenty twenty-one, it's that they got paid, and the tenth of that money probably took longer than the signing.



Herman

I can't verify that tenth, so I'll stay on what's documented: villages recognized, thousands of homes connected. The delivery was real. It just wasn't fast.



Corn

So the open question isn't whether the Arab parties get a seat at the table. It's whether the table is where this gets decided at all.



Herman

A speaker's vote, an inquiry, a budget deadline. None of those needs a ministry. If this stalemate breaks in parliament before a government forms, then the twenty twenty-one deal might be a one-off rather than a template, and if Iran moves first, none of it gets tested.



Corn

The coalition math was never really about arithmetic. It was about what membership buys, and nineteen seats suggests the answer is budget lines, committee chairs, and the credible threat to walk.



Herman

Cabinet posts were the least of it last time.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping the desk running.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode sixty seventy-three, Israel Votes, Part four; episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; and episode sixty-three thirty-five, Why Israeli Election Turnout Means Opposing Things. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, a review helps other people find the show.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

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